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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Covert Operations in Central America

NOAH ADAMS: The House of Representatives approved an amendment to the 1983 Defense Department appropriations bill yesterday in an effort to control U.S. covert operations in Central America. The amendment would specifically prohibit the Defense Department and the CIA from using Pentagon money to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

NPR's Alan Berlow reports.

ALAN BERLOW: The House amendment was approved unanimously by the 411 members voting. That unanimity led many observers to wonder whether the amendment meant anything. The amendment seemed to leave open the option of CIA-funded military activities against Nicaragua as long as they were not intended to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Many observers saw that as a major loophole.

What was clear from the debate, however, was that most members were concerned by press reports that the U.S. is actively engaged in assisting anti-Sandinist paramilitary forces in Honduras. In an hour of House debate, members charged the Reagan Administration with violating everything from the U.N. and OAS charters to the Neutrality and War Powers Acts.

Congressman John Burden of California.

REP. JOHN BURDEN: If we don't stop the CIA now from engaging in covert activities to overthrow a government of another country, we will be involved not just only in Nicaragua, but throughout Central America.

BERLOW: And Democrat James Oberstar of Minnesota.

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REP. JAMES OBERSTAR: How can we profess to be advocating peace, through this Caribbean Basin Initiative, and on the other hand be instigating war by arming and training a group of people committed to the violent overthrow of a government? In this country we'd call them communists. But when it's a matter of Nicaragua, the Reagan Administration provides support and says this is in the interest of democracy.

BERLOW: The indignation was clear. What was less clear was the amendment that the House approved. The Chairman of the Intelligence Committee, Edward Boland of Massachusetts, said he agreed with the intent of the House, and he disclosed that the Intelligence Committees in the House and Senate had already attached a classified annex to the CIA's authorization bill. That annex said no CIA funds should be used, quote, to overthrow the government of Nicaragua or to provoke a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras.

But the reports of covert operations have increased dramatically since the President enacted the CIA authorization in September. Congressman Tom Harkin proposed a more restrictive amendment than the one approved yesterday, but it was defeated. Harkin said today that the language that was approved contains a loophole, but he insisted the intent of the House was clear: to cut off CIA funds to the Somozista forces engaged in operations in Nicaragua. Harkin insisted there was no longer any doubt that those forces are trying to overthrow the Sandinist government. Harkin acknowledged, however, that if the amendment became law, it would be up to Congressman Boland's Intelligence Committee to see that it's enforced.

REP. TOM HARKIN: I'm suggesting that the CIA will have to stop doing what it's doing if our Intelligence Oversight Committee tell them that that is what this amendment means and that they've got to stop it, and that they're going to exercise oversight over the CIA to make sure that no more guns and supplies go to the Somozistas in Honduras. If the Intelligence Committee doesn't do that, then the CIA can go right ahead on doing what they want to do.

BERLOW: The Senate has not yet taken up the defense bill. When it does, Senator Chris Dodd of Connecticut is expected to propose a two-year cutoff of any direct or indirect funding for paramilitary groups operating in Central America over the next two years.